

The new rules of the game

Summary

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RAAD VOOR
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Public debates are important for a democratic society. They are a way of ensuring that public opinions and social norms, which are often based on divergent values, are given tangible form as well as a place on political and social agendas. A public debate is by nature pluralistic. The public domain is after all essentially a domain of multiplicity, of the different values and opinions about how to strive for common interests.

In this advisory report, the Dutch Council for Social Development (RMO) examines the role of new media in the public debate. The Internet has enormous potential for the free formation of public opinion. There is always somewhere for people to express their views; they can select information themselves from a wide range of sources, submit reports themselves on events or react directly to news reports or comments. The new media make it easier for people to organise themselves or to engage in discussion with others, unhindered by location, distance or time. This has given a boost to the plurality of the debate, as well as to the active role of citizens. It has also made it possible for individuals or groups of individuals to organise a public protest against a proposed policy at short notice. Citizens take on the role of rapporteurs, amateur scientists, opinion-makers and even 'opinion directors'. This not only changes their position, but also that of professional journalists, scientists, civil society, the business community, politicians and the government.

The professional codes, social norms and legal rules that apply in physical contexts are not directly applicable in the online world. The boundaries between the personal, public and political domains are blurred, so that the context within which statements are made on the Internet is not always clear. For example, while the established media are bound by professional codes of conduct and (sometimes unstated) norms, such as the right to a fair hearing, on the Internet they operate in a sort of vacuum in which the existing codes of conduct appear not to be tenable. A system of norms and codes of conduct is currently evolving in online environments, with new social norms and regulatory mechanisms emerging. Internet users are collectively developing new rules, while the government, politicians, journalists, businesses and civil-society organisations are repositioning themselves and experimenting with new communication strategies and codes of conduct.

The central analysis in this report suggests that the Internet offers new tools and perspectives for strengthening the plurality and accessibility of public debates, but that this is something that can by no means be assumed

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to happen automatically. While it is true that almost everyone has access to the Internet, not everyone also participates actively in the debate and not everyone is heard. That is of course not a problem in itself; more problematic is the presence of all kinds of more or less hidden inclusion and exclusion mechanisms, both social and infrastructural. The loud voices and the big players, who are able to invest time and money in communication strategies, receive the most attention. Alternative voices are sometimes more difficult to find. Websites generally tend to link visitors to other sites espousing similar views and values, so that Internet users often find themselves caught in a system of 'echo chambers': they think they have all the available information and perspectives at their fingertips, but in reality they are trapped in a limited network of information. Internet users are confronted with the driving force of algorithms and physical infrastructures; and, while those are things that may appear to be neutral, in reality they are anything but. As a result, access to public information and public opinion formation is increasingly falling into the hands of private sector players, such as Internet service providers, search engines and social networking sites. These are the new mediators gatekeepers who largely determine which information is available where and to whom.

The Internet is still evolving rapidly, both socially and technologically, and it is difficult to predict what the situation will be like a few years from now. However, precisely that dynamic in the development of the Internet creates a need to pause briefly and ask questions about the changing position of institutions such as the government, civil-society organisations and the established media within the arena of public debate. How can the government respond to the innumerable online discussions, both small and large, which suddenly flare up like wildfire and create a public issue of national or even international proportions? What role does the journalistic profession have to play, now that journalists find themselves accompanied by ranks of amateur reporters? How far can the new media be encouraged to develop their own codes of conduct to ensure that information and debates continue to be balanced and represent a full range of views? Are new rules needed to govern openness, transparency and accountability? The report highlights a number of tensions and dilemmas and gives a number of provisional answers. With this as a starting point, the RMO is organising a year-long debate on the institutional parameters for a public debate, culminating in a second publication on this topic.

De Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling is de adviesraad van de regering en het parlement op het terrein van participatie van burgers en stabiliteit van de samenleving.

De RMO werkt aan nieuwe concepten voor de aanpak van sociale vraagstukken. De raad bestaat uit negen onafhankelijke kroonleden; de heer mr. S. Harchaoui (voorzitter), de heer prof. dr. P.H.A. Frissen, mevrouw drs. J.G. Manshanden MPA, de heer prof. dr. L.C.P.M. Meijs, mevrouw prof. dr. M. R.J.R.S. van San, mevrouw prof. dr. E.M. Sent en de heer prof. dr. M. de Winter. De heer dr. R. Janssens is algemeen secretaris van de raad. Er zijn momenteel twee vacatures voor een raadslid.

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